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| A Keystone Habit for Our Time

By Jim Pledger On September 26, 2012

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A much-talked-about book currently is *The Power of Habit*. The author, Charles Duhigg, attempts to answer the questions, "Why do habits exist, and how can we change them?" While Duhigg presents scientific evidence about how habits set our patterns of behavior, the most important part of the book, in my opinion, are the stories of how habits are changed, not only in individuals but in organizations.

“ *Keystone habits are those practices that, when changed, start a positive chain reaction that has the power to change an entire organization.* ”

The author tells the story of Paul O'Neill, who became the CEO of Alcoa at a time when the company was near financial collapse. Stockholders expected big changes and probably immediate results. Instead, O'Neill focused on the alarmingly poor safety record. In spite of protests from investors, O'Neill stayed the course, and the safety record improved — and so did the company's bottom line. Why? O'Neill discovered that in any organization there are "keystone habits." Keystone habits are those practices that, when changed, start a positive chain reaction that has the power to change an entire organization.

As I read this intriguing book, I kept wondering what, if anything, these lessons might offer to help congregations and denominations that often appear helpless in the face of rapidly declining membership and participation.

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There is a temptation for churches and denominations to want to solve all our problems in one plan or program — a magic pill. More often than not, each such saving solution fails and leads to increased frustration and cynicism. But what if we could identify one keystone habit in our church, which, if implemented, would be the spark to ignite a transformation within the church and empower its mission to the world?

Here is my keystone habit candidate. Most churches, though certainly not all, have Sunday schools that are declining even faster than worship attendance or other ministries. It is hard to overstate the historic importance of the Sunday school to church growth. Indeed, in some denominations and regions, Sunday school attendance exceeded worship attendance until the mid-20th century. Instead of writing off the Sunday school as a relic of the past, what if a creative group of educators, writers, and publishers came together to help remake and rebrand Sunday school to align it with the mission to make disciples and transform the world?

What if the focus of the new Sunday school became discipleship training linked with missional service? Talk about a keystone habit! It brings together two of the strongest passions in most congregations today — spiritual growth and service to others. Just think of the power coming from thousands of “new” discipleship enterprises. Not only would this new venture lay the spiritual and discipleship foundation for all the church’s ministries; it also has the potential to become the same type of field of energy that class meetings, camp meetings, and Sunday schools provided in past times.

Out of all the issues facing Alcoa, Paul O'Neill focused on safety because he thought the discipline required to improve safety had the power to change the whole direction of the company. Keystone habits have such leverage power. In the era of Sunday school explosion, many other things were going on in churches. But the energy was in the Sunday school. It may have seemed to onlookers that the Sunday school movement was about study, education, or children. It turned out that the Sunday school was actually about the future of the church.

Not everything the church does has equal power to engage and transform the times. Given the average age in many of our churches, renewal probably cannot come from having many more children. But we can focus on that “one thing,” whether it is the one I suggest or another, that can bring about renewal.

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About Author

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Following 20 years as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Sherman, Texas, Jim Pledger is now associate pastor for stewardship, church development, service matters, welcoming ministries at Arlington Heights United Methodist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. He has led congregational revitalization through an emphasis on Sunday school and mission, including founding Great Days of Service.

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